MOVERS & SHAKERS

Cousin Brucie

Way back when rock was young, long before it lost the hyphenated "-n-roll", a Brooklyn teenager tried out for the All City Radio Workshop, an organization which would put New York City teenagers before a microphone and broadcast from a classroom at the Brooklyn Technical High School.

Bruce Morrow couldn't have known it then, but, by getting in, he secured himself a niche in the history of rock radio in New York.

It was raining the morning I met 'Cousin Brucie' at his apartment in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. Stepping through his door I was struck by how comfortable it felt to be there, a real feeling of welcome permeated this place. A collection of vintage record players was spread throughout, on the countertop, on end tables, and, in one corner, stood a huge technicolor jukebox. It must be great at parties.

We settled down on a couch and, to paraphrase the title of a current off-broadway hit, talked radio. Morrow was open, friendly, and very honest, sharing his opinions of what the media should and shouldn't be.

"I fell in love with radio, knew right away that this was going to be it, and my career really started at NYU. I founded the radio station, was on the air, and like thousands of other hopefuls I sent out demo tapes..."

A Florida station offered Morrow a job, on the condition that after his airshift he work four hours at the station owners' car wash. Another offer came from Bermuda. You can probably guess which job he took. He spent the next year on the island doing a "Rock and Roll, Surf Party Record Show," they called me 'The Hammer' because they had never heard anybody who talked like this." His arrival back home on New York radio coincided with an explosion of activity in the amazing time. They (The Beatles) saved the radio industry. The music business had become the business of music, everything was worn out and tired, they came along and gave us a spark."

"I'll tell you a story concerning my own experience with Beatlemania. Capitol Records decided to take advantage of the Beatle phenomenon and put out a Golden Beatles Songbook which they would send to any listener of my show who sent in ten cents. Now this was 1965, the Beatles had really caught on by then, their catalog was really coming out, so it was a nice thick book. I asked the guy, 'how many books do you have?' He says, 'we'll send out 50,000.' Now, if you say something on the radio, you've got to deliver. I said, 'You're going to be in a lot of trouble.' Even they didn't have any idea how big the Beatles really were, so the guy says, 'don't worry about it, according to our calculations, we'll only need 50,000.' Well, after four days we had to pull the promotion. Over 200,000 kids had sent in for the book. So, in the end, they had to print a lot more books. The power of the Beatles was just unbelievable."

At the time, Morrow was an air personality at WABC, and hosting free concerts from the Palisades Amusement Park; it was, "Probably the happiest time of my life." The '70's were another story. "Radio became very boring. Computers came in. Consultants started telling people what they could and couldn't play, and then, of course, there was disco, the biggest hoax ever perpetrated on the American public. All these things helped to make radio, which should be a very personal thing, very impersonal. I had to get out. That's why I became a station owner for a time, so I could program my stations my way."

Today, Bruce Morrow can be heard on WCBS-FM and after thirty years in radio, his philosophy remains pretty much what it was at the very beginning of his career. "My religion is people. The biggest problem facing radio is that broadcasters have forgotten their audience. It's getting better though. Personality is coming back. Why? Not because we're such good guys, but because a fourth generation of rock and roll babies want more than they've been getting; they don't really need radio anymore, there are things like portable CD players now, people can program their own music, so you've got to give them something more. That's why someone like Howard Stern is so popular, although it's not my kind of radio, he's doing something more than segueing records. People complain that he goes too far, but he has got a right to be on the air. He can't know what his limits are, because if he did, he wouldn't be able to do anything. Those people who don't like what he does should just turn him off."

His belief in radio as a medium for expression is total: "Radio is a living, vital thing. If you don't know what you're doing in a particular market, you don't belong on the air. It's not fair to the listeners. Radio is going to bed with somebody, taking a shower with somebody, shopping with somebody, you become a part of a person's life. I feel like I have friends out there who I'm communicating with on a one-to-one basis, I never talk at them. You have to be a part of the community you're serving. That's why I dislike the word 'disc jockey', a D.J. is somebody who sits in a booth and spins records, gives the time, and does the weather. You must feel a responsibility to the community that you're in, you have to be involved, if not, you're just a jukebox, and people will just keep on buying Walkmans and listening to them." □

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